

**One House One Vote:
Consensus Within the Household**

By Jennifer Luna Ann Lacey

Presented to the Department of Economics, University of Oregon, in
partial fulfillment of requirements for honors in Economics.

Under the supervision of Prof. Anne van den Nouweland

June 2010

One House One Vote: Consensus Within the Household

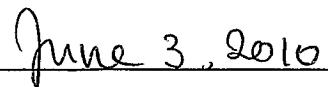
Abstract:

Cooperatives across the country use voting mechanisms that best fit the needs and principles of the decision-making membership. This paper examines the voting mechanisms used by the East Blair Housing Cooperative over the past 28 years. The cooperative changed the voting mechanism in 1996 to better suit members' abilities to impact the general consensus of the cooperative under the principle of "one member one vote." The change from a per unit vote to a per member vote enabled us to observe the differences between these mechanisms. Depending on the voting mechanism of the group, the influence that members and households have to impact consensus will be different. Members or households that have more influence to impact consensus will also have more opportunity to affect the current and future agenda of the cooperative. In conclusion, I propose an alternative voting mechanism that mitigates the imbalance of influence and promotes the principle of cooperation between members and households.

Approved:



Prof. Anne van den Nouweland



Date

Table of Contents

Introduction	4
I. Examining the Cooperative Decision Making Process	5
II. The Per Unit Vote and the Per Member Vote	7
III. The Potential for Differences	10
IV. How the Voting Mechanism Can Change the Demographics of Membership	12
V. How the Voting Mechanism Can Change the Fiscal Agenda	13
VI. How the Voting Mechanism Can Change the Political Agenda	15
VII. Examples in the Cooperative	
Case 1: A Potential Member	16
Case 2: A Luxurious Renovation	17
Case 3: A Depave Project	19
Case 4: The Purpose Statement	20
VIII. The Voting Mechanism and Cooperation	22

Introduction

Living in a cooperative is a unique experience. The process of living cooperatively includes all the managerial aspects that go into running any kind of organization. There are both benefits and costs to living in a housing cooperative. Limited personal equity, minimal privacy, and a required investment of volunteer hours are some of the costs of living cooperatively. Apart from these costs, the benefits include sharing in the expenses of maintaining property, having a larger base by which to influence the greater community, and knowing and engaging with a community of neighbors, sharing tools, food, and childcare. For some people, the primary benefit of living in a cooperative and participating in the cooperative voting mechanism is the ability to influence the environment in which they live with their vote.

Collective decision-making is as old as any group in the world, from the indigenous tribes in the Americas to early settler families in the South to modern day fraternities. However, in many situations there is an informal means of making decisions. Perhaps there is not a formal guideline in your family of how one should go about consenting to a family decision, but there is more likely a folk tradition of how it has always been done. If the means by which decisions were made in your family changed, perhaps the agenda for those decisions also changed. When the structure of decision-making becomes more formal, inclusive of members and legally binding, the process by which groups make decisions can directly impact the agenda of those groups.

I. Examining the Cooperative Decision Making Process

Historically cooperatives have used majority, super majority, modified consensus or consensus voting in order to reach decisions in the cooperative organization. Majority voting is described as obtaining more than 50% of the voting base. Super majority and modified consensus both require some percentage of the vote greater than 50% of the voting base. This percentage is decided upon by the organization and is typically very close to 100% for modified consensus. Consensus voting is described as obtaining 100% of the voting base.

Cooperatives use the consensus model of decision making with the goal to reach the best possible decision for all of their members. Rather than opt to pursue a majority opinion which could be to the detriment of the minority, consensus decision-making emphasizes the agreement of all members on any proposal. However, this process requires a level of commitment and time, and many groups have modified the process in order to enable business to happen in groups where consensus cannot be made. Often a modified consensus decision-making process is required in order to secure confidence in the group's ability to achieve progress.

The East Blair Housing Cooperative (EBHC) has used modified consensus since its inception. The modified consensus in EBHC accepts proposals with fewer than 2 blocking votes to consensus. The modified consensus voting mechanism EBHC outlined in the original bylaws of 1981 states:

Section 7. Voting. There shall be one vote per membership. If the membership

is jointly owned, that one vote may be divided into fractions representing the joint ownership interests. At every meeting of the regular members, each membership present shall have the right to cast one full vote on each question, and a question brought before such a meeting will be decided by consensus minus one. If two attempts to reach consensus minus one have failed, the question will then be decided by a two-thirds (2/3) vote. All questions will be decided by the above system unless the question is one upon which, by express provisions of Statute or the Articles of incorporation or these Bylaws, a different vote is required, in which case such express provision shall govern and control. Any member voting a fraction of a vote must so state prior to the vote being taken.

The initial statement in this section of the bylaws suggests that each member household can vote in a meeting, while the last statement suggests that it is each member within the household that can vote in any meeting. This inconsistency in the explanation of the voting mechanism led members of EBHC to interpret this section of the bylaws as giving each member within a multi-member household a fraction of that household's full vote. Evidence of fractional votes can be observed throughout the first decade of meeting minutes. Members of EBHC could have interpreted the voting mechanism in the bylaws to mean that members within a multi-member household must come to consensus within the household prior to voting in the general membership. Since the members of EBHC practiced the per unit vote by giving members within a multi-member household fractions of the full vote, this is how the per unit vote will be defined for the rest of this article.

The policy of a per unit vote is significantly different from a per member vote. A per unit vote emphasizes the equality between each unit in that the unit is the means of representing the alliance that is formed within that household. On the other hand, a per member vote emphasizes the equality between each member in that each member has the ability to represent themselves and their best intention for the cooperative. However, the per member vote gives each household more votes.

II. The Per Unit Vote and the Per Member Vote.

The East Blair Housing Cooperative was the idea of a Eugene resident who wrote a plan called "Urban Plan" in 1978. The plan described the means by which a neighborhood could achieve a sustainable neighborhood environment. Cooperative housing was sustainable housing that grew trust, accountability, and a sense of community in the neighborhood. At the time the plan was written, the manifestation of EBHC was far from fruition. The plan estimated the cost of the housing project to be nearly 2 million dollars.

Two years after the urban plan was written, a figure close to two million dollars was submitted in a grant proposal to the federal government and the funds were granted under the moderate rehabilitation program of the Carter Administration. EBHC was to be regulated by the Housing And Community Services Agency (HACSA) with funding coming from federally allocated subsidies. The plan would last for 15 years, after which the cooperative would no longer be under government control.

During the years under government regulation, members of EBHC were subject to income criteria. Members had to qualify and remain within income guidelines to live in the cooperative. Specifically, members had to be under 50% of the median income for Lane county in order to live in the housing cooperative. Further regulation stipulated guidelines for household compositions such as who could and could not live in the household. HACSA did not allow residents to have roomates.

As expected, the government contract came to an end in 1996 and the members were granted full autonomy in the management of the housing cooperative. The transfer of management granted members authority to decide both policy and fiscal management of the cooperative into the present. It also opened potential membership to all candidates, not necessarily based on criteria of income. Therefore, the purpose of the East Blair Housing Cooperative to support the low-income population, which was mandated and maintained by the local government prior to 1996, was no longer central to the perpetuation of the cooperative.

Also in 1996, there was a significant change to the voting mechanism of the cooperative. In the original bylaws of EBHC, the voting mechanism distributed votes to each unit, thus there was one vote per unit. Based on 22 units, if multiple members lived within a unit, each member received a fraction of that unit's vote. If the member with a fractional vote did not agree with consensus, that member would have less influence than members with a full vote to block the consensus of the group.

For example, in 1998 there was a proposal to turn the south parking lot of the

cooperative into a garden, which was passed with full consensus of all members. Hypothetically, if members had chosen to block the proposal, the influence of each member's vote would have had an effect on the outcome of the decision. In the case where there were two full blocking votes, the parking lot would not have been turned into a garden. Under a per member vote, two members could block the consensus of the group. This means that one household with two members could effectively influence the outcome of any proposal in the cooperative. However, under a per unit vote that same household would have one full vote which would not have the combined influence to block consensus.

The per unit voting mechanism changed as a result of 2 members, who felt that their individual fractional votes underrepresented their unit. At that time, the demographics at EBHC were primarily single parent households. This meant that a majority of units had a single voting member. The exception was the unit which housed two voting members each with a fraction of a vote. The argument was made that a change be made to give each member of the cooperative the same influence in the voting process regardless of whether they shared a unit. The proposal was presented to the general membership where there was a consensus to change the bylaws to reflect the new voting strategy of a per member vote.

The voting mechanism that the cooperative uses to find the consensus of the group will have different results depending on whether each vote cast represents a unit or a member. On one hand, the per unit voting mechanism may give a member less influence to impact the outcome of a vote in the cooperative. On the other hand, the

per member voting mechanism may give one unit more influence to impact the outcome of a vote.

III. The Potential for Differences.

In EBHC, there exist 22 units with 9 one-bedroom apartments, 12 two-bedroom apartments and 1 three-bedroom apartment.

- ❖ If the number of members equaled the number of bedrooms:
 - ❖ In a per unit vote, the outcome would be based on 9 full votes, 24 half votes and 3 third votes. In order to block a proposal, a composition of a minimum of 2 full votes that could include up to 5 members, would be needed to disagree with consensus.
 - ❖ In a per member vote, the outcome would be based on 36 full votes. In order to block a proposal, any two members would need to disagree with consensus.

In a full consensus decision-making model, agreements would have to be reached within each household. However, in a majority or modified consensus decision-making model, full vote members or members in single-member households have more power to influence decisions by blocking consensus than do those members with fractional votes. Under the per member vote, 2 members from multi-member households could use the power of their full votes to block consensus. In contrast, those same two members under a per unit vote would not have enough influence with their fractional votes to impact consensus.

The extra influence that member votes have under the per unit and the per member voting mechanism allows members to steer the agenda of the cooperative towards the consensus of those members who have more influence. In regards to a per unit vote, those members of single-member households will have more influence on consensus since each member in a single-member household obtains a full vote which constitutes half of a block to consensus; whereas in a two-member household each member obtains a half vote which by itself constitutes a quarter of a block to consensus. In regards to a per member vote, a two-member household where both members each have a full vote may constitute a block to consensus, the influence members of multi-member households will have on consensus will be greater than the influence of a member in a single-member household. The greater influence a vote has to block consensus, the greater the ability of that vote to steer the agendas that the group will vote on.

In a housing cooperative, such agendas may include the demographics of the cooperative including potential member applicants, the fiscal agenda including how money is spent, or the political agenda including prospective policy changes. As agendas items are brought to the group and blocked, the potential that that item will be brought up again is unlikely. In this way blocks have the potential to steer agendas. We can observe the impact of the voting mechanism on various agendas in the cooperative.

IV. How the Voting Mechanism Can Change the Demographics of Membership.

The people who live in a cooperative represent the cooperative. From the beginning of the East Blair Housing Cooperative in 1982 until the government ended its regulatory relationship with the cooperative in 1996, the people who lived in the cooperative were required to fit criteria laid out under government regulated income standards. This criteria required applicants to have income below 50% of the median income for Lane County. This criterion acted as a screen by which all potential members brought before the general membership were low-income applicants. The demographics of the cooperative during this time period turn out to be 81% single-member households and 19% multi-member households. However, when the subsidization of the cooperative ended in 1996, potential members were no longer screened for low-income qualifications. The demographics of the cooperative after 1996 to the current membership turn out to be made of 59% single-member households and 41% multi-member households. Rather than prioritizing potential members by income qualifications, they were now subject to the individual values of voting members. Therefore, the demographics of the cooperative have changed.

People who live together generally have similar values. If the values of members in a multi-member household were different, then under a per unit voting mechanism each member's influence in consensus would be inferior to those members living in single-member households. Each fractional vote would become smaller as the number of members living in the household increased. The values of those members

with inferior influence would be at a disadvantage to the values of members with full votes to in their potential to influence consensus. Values—fiscal, political, cultural, or religious—can be a determinant in deciding whether to accept or reject a potential member in the cooperative.

Under a per member vote, a multi-member household with members who have similar values, would not only have more influence to block membership but would also have more influence to steer the applicant pool. In the situation where all the members of a multi-member household choose to consistently disagree with consensus based on a shared value in that household, the membership could potentially prioritize acceptance of potential members based on the shared value of the blocking household, thus prioritizing the values of those members living in multi-member households.

V. How the Voting Mechanism Can Change the Fiscal Agenda.

Fiscal agendas in the cooperative can be the most contentious agendas in the cooperative process considering that members often have significantly different perspectives of and priorities with regards to spending and investment. The fiscal agenda in the cooperative has various aspects such as the structure and approval of the annual budget, members' spending priorities, and philosophical differences in debt and investment. In order for any spending, investment, or policy to take place, members must have a modified-consensus on the specified agenda.

The preparation of the budget for the cooperative happens annually. Which categories the membership prioritizes may change given the members at large. In the annual budget for the East Blair Housing Cooperative, categories include membership costs such as childcare, outreach, and education, as well as grounds costs such as building maintenance, landscaping, appliance replacement, and overhaul projects. Lastly, there are management costs such as taxes, insurance, and other fixed costs of regular operation of the housing cooperative.

Given the membership at large, there may be consensus to prioritize spending trends that emphasize beautification over maintenance or to prioritize used replacement parts to new replacement parts, or to agree to overhaul projects instead of to specific repairs. Examples of these priorities can be observed when members are made to buy used refrigerators instead of new refrigerators in an effort to save money, or when money is spent on extensive landscaping designs over gutter replacement, or when the membership blocks inspecting electrical, plumbing, drainage or structural damages because of the high costs of specialized labor but neglects to adequately address the problem. The priorities that precede decisions that the membership makes today may lead to consequences for future members' abilities to spend, borrow and invest. The amount of influence a household has in the consensus process may affect the projects that the cooperative prioritizes.

Whether the group members are debt seekers or balancers of the budget, if there is a significant difference in the prioritizing of spending and investment, then the priorities of members under a per unit vote or a per member vote will have different

influences in their ability to impact consensus. In regards to a per member vote, members within a unit may have similar priorities on spending. If amongst the general membership, members of a multi-member household disagree with consensus because their fiscal priorities differ from other members' priorities, then the priorities of multi-member households will have more influence in impacting the fiscal agenda of the cooperative than those of single-member households.

VI. How the Voting Mechanism Can Change the Political Agenda.

As time passes, membership will solve problems and make progress in creating policy that allows for operations to run more smoothly. Policy creation happens in order to work out idiosyncrasies in the process of managing the cooperative. If there are disagreements in the direction of the cooperative, in the orientation of process, or in the philosophy of operation, then how these disagreements affect consensus will be influenced by the voting mechanism. The amounts of influence members have to block consensus for creation of specific policies could affect the direction and progress of operations in the cooperative.

In those cases where the general membership lacks the capacity to function properly, the general membership may propose creation of criteria and processes by which the cooperative could function more smoothly. Depending on the consensus amongst the general membership, those policies may or may not pass. The influence of members in

determining policy changes directly affects whether the cooperative will function properly for future generations.

VII. Examples in the Cooperative.

CASE 1: A Potential Member

In 2007, an applicant applied for membership to the cooperative. The applicant was applying to live in a single unit and was the partner of a long-standing member in the cooperative. The applicant was initially denied membership by two blocking votes of members in the cooperative. The per member voting mechanism allowed these members, one of whom lived in a multi-member household, to block the potential membership of the applicant in 2007. However, under the per unit voting mechanism, their combined influence would not have constituted a block to the consensus of the group.

The reasons given for the blocking votes were a fear that the potential member would always vote in unison with the potential member's partner, a long-standing member of the cooperative. Since people in partnership often share values, a voting alliance could be formed between the members. After amendments were made to the proposal to accept the potential member, the partner of the long-standing member became a member.

Although the two members did not live together, the partnered members voted the same way on agenda items which in many cases became a voting block. This is an example of what can occur in households where members of the household may have the same values or perspectives on agenda items. Therefore, the per member voting mechanism may give a multi-member household more influence to block agenda items and determine the direction of policy in the cooperative.

CASE 2: A Luxurious Renovation

One of the older buildings in the cooperative underwent an renovation project in 2007. The original house was a historical two-bedroom house in the Whiteaker neighborhood. In the 1970's the building was raised and turned into a triplex. The downstairs units were both single bedroom units. Members speculated that the foundation was being damaged from lack of drainage and that the drainage problems were creating mold infestation inside the walls of the building. The proposal to renovate the downstairs units had a consensus of the membership and the renovation project was completed in the winter of 2007.

Prior to the renovation project, the proponents of the renovation project proposed creating a drainage system that would remedy possible damage being done to the foundation. The proposal was presented in 2005 to an adverse membership that did not accept the proposal. If the drainage proposal had been accepted by the general membership in 2005, the proposal for redesign and renovation would not have been proposed in 2007.

The difference between the proposed projects was significant in the financial effect it had on members. The initial proposal for the drainage project had the upward cost of \$4300 and could have been covered in the cooperative's annual budget for maintenance. The overhaul project had the final cost of over \$200,000 which meant each unit's rent was raised by 8.5%. The impact on all future members of the cooperative by the latter proposal was that members pay upward of \$500 extra dollars a year in raised rents, the capital reserves of the cooperative were decreased, and the potential for borrowing in the future was reduced.

The voting mechanism in this case could have potentially impacted the future financial agenda of the cooperative. If the initial proposal had passed, there may not have been a more dramatic and costly second agenda proposed and the cost to future members of the cooperative would have been far less than the costs of the overhaul project. Hypothetically, if the few members who opposed the initial project had had fractional votes under a per unit voting mechanism, their combined influence would not have been able to block the initial project and the cost to future members of the cooperative would have been significantly reduced. Furthermore, if opponents to the initial drainage project lived in the same household under a per member vote and both members valued luxurious investments, their combined influence could reject any proposal for cost controlled repairs in favor of more costly and luxurious renovations. Thus the voting mechanism could have had a significant impact on future members in regards to rent increases and future projects and investments.

CASE 3: The Depave Project

Prior to 2000, EBHC had two parking lots that held between 8 and 12 cars. In 1998, members proposed to turn the south parking lot into a community space that did not involve parked cars. The project, called “depave,” was a means of reclaiming space allotted for vehicles by pulling up the pavement and filling the space in with soil. The project was approved by the general membership with full consensus.

Since the depave project in the south parking lot occurred in 1998, the space has become an asset to the community; children have space to play, members have planted food, flowers and fruit trees, and there is a fire pit where members have a safe evening environment to socialize. Members thought that the depave project was so successful that in 2006 those members recommended to depave the last existing parking lot called the north parking lot.

The initial proposal to depave the north parking lot encountered opposition from members in 2006. The opponents, most of whom owned cars, explained that the lack of parking spaces would encroach on their ability to park reasonably close to their house. Some opponents of the proposal argued for their right to store their cars in the parking lot until they could afford to fix them. Proponents of the depave project felt that turning the parking lot into a garden would support their value of living car-free. Arguments ensued and the proposal to depave the north parking lot was blocked.

The depave proposal is an example of how members value agenda items differently.

The members who needed parking spaces and valued car storage were able to block consensus in favor of their interests. The members who valued garden space, play areas for children, and living car-free were not able to affect the future of the cooperative with their proposal. Hypothetically, if the opponents had fractional votes, their interests and needs would have had less influence to impact consensus than members with full votes. Furthermore, if a multi-member household had opposed the agenda item, then the interests and needs of one household would have had more influence than other households to affect the future of the cooperative.

CASE 4: The Purpose Statement

We can observe the dynamics of consensus on policy creation in the case of the purpose statement. Since turnover amongst members of the cooperative is common, there are usually a few new members a year. Members understand the cooperative process first by reading the legal documents of the cooperative. These legal documents include the Articles of Incorporation, the Bylaws, and the Policy/Guidelines Handbook. In general, these documents will give members their initial impression of the cooperative process. Members will use the purpose statement, outlined in the Articles of Incorporation and the Bylaws, to understand the purpose or goal of the cooperative and the direction of consensus.

As new members read the purpose statement outlined in the Articles and the Bylaws, they will find that the purposes are not consistent. In the Articles of Incorporation

the purpose statement states:

“The purposes for which EBHC is organized are: to provide its members with housing and community facilities on a cooperative basis; to develop as much low cost, cooperatively owned housing as is possible, to assist the preservation and growth of affordable housing, to promote the formation of geographically-centered housing groups; to develop other services of benefit to the membership and community, to utilize all legal rights and powers in furtherance of the above purposes; and to engage in any lawful activity for which cooperative corporations may be organized under ORS Chapter 52.”

In the Bylaws approved in 2003, the purpose statement reads:

“The purpose of East Blair Housing Cooperative is to promote and create low-cost, cooperatively-owned housing which (1) provides residential housing for low-income people that is managed and controlled by those low-income people; (2) builds and enhances a sense of community among its members and among its neighbors; and (3) provides some of the benefits of residential housing ownership to people who would otherwise not be able to afford it. EBHC shall not discriminate against any person on the basis of race, nationality, place of origin, ethnic background, religion, gender, sexual orientation, familial status, economic class, age, mental or physical disability, or political affiliation.”

The inconsistency of the purpose statement lies in the identification of low cost or low income. For some members, “low-cost” means providing housing at a cost lower than market rents which will make the housing available to people of all income levels.

For other members, “low-income” means that the cooperative should be actively screening member’s income in order to regulate the cooperative as a low-income housing cooperative. The identification to low cost or low income is observed during potential member screening. Some members disregard potential members based on income criteria while other members continue to pursue and process applications of potential members of various income levels.

The potential for consensus on the purpose statement is unlikely considering there are members that live in the cooperative who do not qualify as low income. The voting mechanism in the cooperative becomes significant in this context since the members who do not qualify as low income are members in a multi-member household. Given the voting mechanism is a per unit vote, those members in one unit would not constitute enough influence to block the consensus to regulate income criteria. On the other hand, if the voting mechanism is a per member vote, the members of the multi-member household would have the combined influence to block consensus to regulate income criteria.

VIII. The Voting Mechanism and Cooperation.

The principles of the cooperative movement were described by the Rochdale Pioneers in 1844 as those principles that distinguish cooperatives from profit-oriented businesses. The principles include the democratic control by every member to have only one vote regardless of the member’s share or investment in the cooperative. The

principle of “one member one vote” has become very popular in the cooperative movement regardless of the type of cooperative.

The per member voting mechanism gives each member the opportunity to directly influence the agenda being voted on within a group. This can be an empowering experience for members of the cooperative. Often agenda items are proposed in order to fix problems in the cooperative. These can be the problems of vacant units and annual budget allocations or maintenance and policy problems. Each member has the responsibility to determine which solution will be the best fit for the problem each agenda addresses. This is an invaluable opportunity for members to gain skills in management, problem solving and self-determination. A per member voting mechanism facilitates the process of leveling the influence any member has over another member enabling each member to feel equally valuable in the cooperative process.

The per member voting mechanism does not address what happens when a household has more than one member and those members tend to agree on the proposed agenda items of the cooperative. Differences in income, lifestyle, and perspectives on everything from managing a group to understanding group needs may vary substantially between single-member and multi-member households. Unless the tendency for household composition to be a determinant of influence in the consensus process is corrected for, the per member vote will not represent households equally.

The per unit voting mechanism recognizes the differences that may arise from

different household compositions. Members within a household may share values and have a greater potential to cooperate amongst themselves. Members within the same household may more often than not attempt to solve a problem in a similar way. They may agree that what works best for their shared household may work well for the cooperative in a certain proposed agenda. A per unit voting mechanism facilitates the process of leveling the amount of influence any household has over another household. Since no preference is given to household composition, a household with one member will have the same amount of voting influence as a household with five members. As long as all the members of the household agree on every agenda item, the mechanism allows members from different household compositions to feel equally valuable in the cooperative process.

The per unit voting mechanism may not be ideal in situations where members within a household do not have shared values, perspectives, or priorities. Under circumstances where people live together for reasons that are largely beyond their control, members within a household may not agree with the other members in the household. When members disagree with other members of their household, each member casts their own fractional vote. Since fractional votes have less influence to impact consensus than full votes, the per unit vote creates an inferior group of voting members.

The voting mechanisms we have observed so far include the per unit and per member vote. The per member vote may be best suited for household compositions with multiple members who disagree with one another. The per unit vote may be suited for household compositions with multiple members who regularly agree with one

another. There is another voting mechanism that is inferred by the original bylaws that may incorporate the positive attributes of both voting mechanisms and encourage cooperation amongst members.

In the original bylaws of EBHC , the voting mechanism was outlined as :

“There shall be one vote per membership. If the membership is jointly owned, that one vote may be divided into fractions representing the joint ownership interests. At every meeting of the regular members, each membership present shall have the right to cast one full vote on each question...“

Members understood and practiced the voting mechanism in the manner that every member from a multi-member household at a meeting received a fraction of the full vote of the household and could vote regardless of whether that vote was in accordance with that of other members in that household. This presented problems for members that disagreed with consensus since those members did not have the same influence as members of single member households to impact consensus. Thus in 1996, members of a multi-member household objected to sharing a full vote, and proposed that the voting mechanism be changed to reflect the democratic principle of “one member one vote.” There was a consensus of the general membership and the bylaws were changed.

The original interpretation of the voting mechanism outlined in the bylaws was a fractional per unit vote where the full vote of a unit was divided and each member in the household was represented by a fraction of the full vote of the unit. However, the voting mechanism in the bylaws could be interpreted as a non-fractional per unit

voting mechanism where a full vote is not split amongst members in the household. A non-fractional per unit vote would have members within a household come to consensus prior to voting with the general membership. This may be a better way of representing all individuals in the consensus voting process without giving an undue influence to either a member within single-member or multi-member households.

Assume by the statement “each membership present shall have the right to cast one full vote on each question...” that each household has one full vote that needs to be shared equally between all the members in the household through a separate process of consensus, prior to voting within the greater general membership. If a multi-member household disagrees with the larger consensus of the group, their full vote does not constitute enough influence to block the consensus of the general membership. Furthermore, if one member disagrees with consensus and is able to influence other members of the household, then the consensus of the household’s disagreement will have a stronger influence on the consensus of the general membership than the fractional vote of one member in the household who disagreed.

As a result of my experience living in the cooperative, the act of cooperating starts within the household. If members within a household are able to cooperate and come to consensus within their household prior to meeting with the general membership, then cooperation and consensus with the general membership will have a higher potential for success. It is common with hot agenda items, that people become nervous, emotional, or over-passionate in their debate of an agenda item. Practicing consensus within a household allows people to practice their argument and gain

confidence in debating an issue prior to representing their argument in the larger group. When members within a household disagree, the act of discussing agenda items and practicing consensus may provide members with the opportunity to uncover unforeseen details about the differing viewpoints and perceptions that exist between members in regards to the agenda item. If members are then able to find agreement on an agenda item, the lessons learned in the process of obtaining consensus within the household will be a benefit to the general membership attempting consensus.

Finally, in my opinion, the non-fractional per unit voting mechanism is the best fit voting mechanism for a housing cooperative. It enables cohesive cooperation between members of the smallest factor, the household. Once the household is able to agree to consensus, there is a good sign that the larger group will share the skills to agree with consensus. In the long run, a housing cooperative that embraces consensus in the smallest factors of the group will enable cooperation to flourish and be responsible to the greatest of differences between members.